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HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 530th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 7 October 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND BURDEN-SHARING IN ALL ITS ASPECTS: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR REFUGEES (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/904) (continued)

1. Mr. NDIAYE (Observer for Senegal) said that the globalization of the economy and technological progress had made the world a smaller place and heightened the responsibility of the international community in dealing with global crises. The social, environmental and human consequences of present-day conflicts required a philosophy rooted in a long-term outlook. Today's legacy to future generations should be an ever-present concern.

2. All the major international instruments which defined the ethical responsibilities of States took for granted the right of asylum, i.e. the duty to take in and give assistance to displaced persons. But States also had a duty to forestall likely conflicts before they occurred.

3. As far as burden-sharing was concerned, the most logical approach would be to work through the hierarchy of institutions, namely, States, regions and the international community. Neighbouring States and States in the same region would necessarily assume the brunt of the burden of hosting refugees. Where good-neighbourliness failed to provide a solution, the international community would be obliged to intervene. In reality, however, the picture was somewhat more complex in that the political and humanitarian responsibilities of all the actors in a refugee crisis were interdependent. Simply denying that fact would lead to a situation in which certain responsibilities might be forgotten or shirked.

4. Senegal had played an active role in the recent humanitarian mission in Guinea-Bissau and was continuing its efforts to bring about peace in West Africa. His delegation appealed to UNHCR, the United Nations specialized agencies and all States to strengthen their efforts to re-establish peace and security based on the rule of law.

5. Mr. SANOUSSI (Observer for Guinea) said that recent troubles in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau had led to serious refugee and other problems in West Africa. Owing to its location at the heart of the region, Guinea had borne the brunt of the refugee outflows caused by those troubles. There were currently 700,000 refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone in Guinea, a figure equal to one tenth of its population. The true figure was probably much higher; a refugee census was therefore an urgent priority. It was a matter of particular concern that the most recent wave of refugees from Guinea-Bissau had received no humanitarian assistance; to make matters worse, they were living in areas where there was already a food shortage. If no humanitarian assistance was forthcoming in the very near future, their presence could have grave consequences for the local population and environment.

6. In some areas of Guinea, the refugee population currently outnumbered the locals. Intensive farming of arable land by recently-arrived refugees had led to rapid soil degradation and deforestation. The dramatic increase in the

size and concentration of the population had also led to sanitation problems, depletion of medical supplies, social upheaval and a rapid deterioration of the road network. Government expenditure had skyrocketed.

7. Although aware of the valuable work being done by UNHCR all over the world, the Guinean Government believed that the High Commissioner had not devoted sufficient resources to the desperate situation in Guinea. Furthermore, his Government was acutely concerned about security in the region following armed incursions by rebel forces from Sierra Leone. Accordingly, refugees should be made aware of their responsibilities while residing in the territory of another State and measures should be taken to site refugee camps further away from international borders.

8. Guinea was in the process of reorganizing its administrative structure for dealing with refugees and framing new legislation to address refugee-related issues. By doing so, his Government was demonstrating its commitment to establishing procedures for admitting refugees and granting them leave to remain in the country while at the same time ensuring their protection. But none of those measures would bear fruit unless adequate humanitarian assistance was made available. The international community could also demonstrate its solidarity by strengthening the operational capacity of security forces stationed at reception points.

9. Guinea strongly advocated crisis-prevention mechanisms and, in that connection, would welcome any UNHCR effort to initiate diplomatic steps leading to a definitive settlement of West African conflicts. Preventive diplomacy had an enormous role to play in forestalling refugee outflows and eliminating the causes of conflicts.

10. Mr. CASTRILLÓN JARAMILLO (Observer for Ecuador) said that refugee crises had an especially disruptive effect on the economy and society of developing countries and it was essential therefore to adopt measures to mitigate those repercussions in the short term. At the same time, the foundations should be laid for an international burden-sharing mechanism. International solidarity should also involve the provision of technical assistance, thereby helping developing countries to cope with refugee flows at the organizational level. Financial and technical assistance was required to implement programmes for the return and resettlement of refugees.

11. The international community should also lay the foundations for a mechanism to protect refugees living in particularly dangerous conditions in order to enhance UNHCR's effectiveness in terms of supervising and coordinating the protection of displaced people.

12. Mr. SESAY (Observer for Sierra Leone) said that his Government was grateful for the excellent work UNHCR had been doing and continued to do in Sierra Leone since the outbreak of the rebel war in 1991 and the events of 1997, when a group of misguided and unpatriotic elements of the military forces had connived with rebels and seized power from the democratically elected Government. The unprecedented mayhem and nightmare unleashed by the junta coalition on innocent unarmed civilians had led to the exodus of thousands seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, joining thousands who had earlier sought refuge during the seven years of rebel war.

13. UNHCR had been in the process of finalizing programmes for the repatriation of the former refugees when they had been joined by an even larger number of their compatriots, completely disrupting what would have been a well-organized repatriation exercise. The resilience of the Sierra Leonean people, combined with the universal condemnation of the coup by the entire international community, had helped to isolate the junta, which had eventually been removed from power with the intervention of the Nigerian-led forces of the Monitoring Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) in February 1998. Although the democratically elected Government had since been reinstalled and 90 per cent of the country liberated, remnants of the junta and their collaborators continued to cause the most unimaginable atrocities, including mutilations of innocent villagers, thus fuelling the second exodus of refugees to Guinea and Liberia. International solidarity with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to support ECOMOG activities was urgently required to put an end to such atrocities. UNHCR had been extremely helpful in meeting the immediate needs of those newly arrived refugees by providing them with food and non-food items, water supply systems, latrines, medical assistance, shelter, protection and administrative support.

14. The old caseload of 222,550 refugees, overwhelmed by the new caseload of 267,443 refugees, incidents of infiltration by rebels into the refugee camps in Guinea and aggressions against Sierra Leonean refugees in camps in Liberia had made the Sierra Leonean situation a complex one that warranted a complex intervention. Refugees who had been living in camps for the past seven years were anxiously hoping to return to their respective towns and villages, but had nothing to return to, as the fleeing junta forces had looted and destroyed their homes.

15. His Government was well aware of the fact that the rehabilitation of homes and other social infrastructure, and the creation of job opportunities, did not fall within UNHCR's mandate, but any attempt to repatriate those refugees without due consideration of reintegration programmes would be counterproductive. Although it was not the practice of UNHCR to camp returnees in their countries of origin, temporary transit arrangements would be necessary not far from their places of origin for that category of refugees. That was particularly essential for refugees whose places of origin were not safe, but who were anxious to go home because of potential instability in the areas where they had taken refuge. His Government had recently received reports of the consistent harassment of Sierra Leonean refugees in the places of refuge. The infiltration on 1 September 1998 by rebels of camps in Guinea, which had resulted in the death of 10 people, including refugees, had created grave concern for the safety and welfare of Sierra Leonean refugees.

16. Inasmuch as many Sierra Leonean refugees had settled in border areas with Liberia and Guinea and in view of the special situation prevailing in those areas, UNHCR should consider extending repatriation packages to "facilitated" as well as "spontaneous" returnees. That was necessary since most of those refugees were located along the common borders adjacent to their areas of origin and it was assumed that many would spontaneously cross the borders, without waiting for organized transportation or assistance, once the

security situation had improved. Once home, however, they were faced with the stark realities of their empty environment, a situation that made the peace process very fragile and vulnerable.

17. Although UNHCR's main mandate was to cater for the needs of refugees, his Government invited it also to consider the case of internally displaced persons who, because of the damage to both the economic and physical infrastructure, found it difficult to benefit from humanitarian assistance. NGOs had been very forthcoming in that regard, but there was a big gap between what was provided and what was required. He conveyed his country's gratitude to countries in the West African subregion which had had to shoulder the burden of caring for Sierra Leonean refugees.

18. As the organized mass repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees was not currently feasible due to the security situation in some parts of the country, the Government had recently initiated action with a view to complementing the work of UNHCR by facilitating the return of Sierra Leonean refugees from Guinea and Liberia. Missions would soon be dispatched to liberated areas in Sierra Leone to assess their security for receiving returning refugees. The Government had also begun to make arrangements for field missions to the refugee camps in Guinea and Liberia in order to sensitize the refugees and prepare them for returning. To accomplish those ventures, the Government would rely on the continued support and advice of UNHCR. There should be more willingness on the part of developed countries to share the burden of refugees, especially in the context of providing asylum.

19. Mr. GUDUZA (Observer for Swaziland) said that his country continued to uphold its national, regional and international obligations and jealously to guard the institution of asylum. It continued to pursue refugee advocacy initiatives vigorously and was proud to announce the completion of the translated version of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa into the local language, Siswati. That would ensure wider readership and understanding of the Convention and the nation at large would be better educated about refugees, thereby removing the stigma often attached to refugees and hopefully reducing xenophobic tendencies.

20. Swaziland followed with keen interest mediation attempts aimed at restoring peace to its troubled neighbours. For the first time in the history of the Kingdom's defence force, military officers had attended a peacekeeping training exercise, a real indication of the country's desire to play a meaningful role in peacekeeping. That proactive stance had been assumed deliberately in line with Swaziland's preference for preventive rather than reactive diplomacy. In addition, at the local level, the Swazi community had been engaged in a number of refugee-related activities, such as ongoing public awareness for school children, media seminars and competitions. Over the past two years, refugees had been involved in substantive conflict resolution and trauma initiatives; those efforts had been generously facilitated by the Government and the UNHCR/NGO Partnership in Action (PARinAC). While some people might view burden-sharing as a question of too many cooks spoiling the broth, he would rather believe that many a hand made the burden lighter. He urged the Executive Committee to revisit the 1994 Oslo Declaration and Plan of Action that had given birth to the PARinAC process, which, if properly guided, nurtured and utilized, could prove to be invaluable.

21. In an effort to protect the institution of asylum, Swaziland had initiated a process with its neighbours to confront the refugee problem. It continued to be a faithful and active promoter of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and UNHCR. Its geographical location in the southernmost part of Africa had not interfered with its open-door policy. It continued to receive refugees from such far-flung locations as the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Quite recently, the Swaziland Government had met with three others to deliberate on the irregular migration of refugees. Such efforts aimed only to eliminate "pull havens", which had the potential of seriously compromising the institution of asylum.

22. Mr. NAVARRO (European Commission Humanitarian Office) said that the European Union was the largest donor of world humanitarian aid, providing more than 50 per cent of all such assistance. His organization tried to represent the human face of Europe and save lives and, since its creation six years earlier, it had become an important actor on the humanitarian scene. Its budget was less than 1 per cent of the Community budget, but was nonetheless significant, accounting for some 25 per cent of all world humanitarian aid. Europeans, and his Office, in particular, had an obligation to manage those resources as efficiently and transparently as possible. Not only were they accountable to taxpayers, but efficiency in humanitarian aid was also measured in terms of lives saved and suffering alleviated. In addition, humanitarian aid had considerable political impact. It had often been said that Europe was an economic giant, but a political dwarf, and perhaps that political impotence could be offset by a greater humanitarian role.

23. The world was changing for the worse, with civilians being used as human shields and as economic and strategic resources in conflicts and parties to conflicts becoming less the protectors and more the predators of civilians. Humanitarian aid was not a solution when dealing with the effects of political crises, which required political solutions. An example was Kosovo, where another humanitarian disaster was occurring. He wondered how much suffering would have to be endured until the authorities in Belgrade realized that only a political solution was possible.

24. UNHCR was his Office's largest partner by far and that partnership should be strengthened.

25. Mr. PROCHACKA (Observer for the Slovak Republic) said the number of migrants, mainly illegal, coming to Central Europe from Balkan, Asian and some African countries was growing. The ultimate goal for many of them was western Europe. Consequently, the implementation of the changes envisaged in the Schengen/Dublin approach, which should contribute to better management of migrant and refugee flows in Europe, required consideration of the question of burden-sharing among European countries and regions. His Government would participate in burden-sharing in the asylum procedure, as well as in assistance to refugees. It was prepared to take its share of responsibility in accordance with the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, which were the basis for the national Refugee Act that had been in force since 1996. The amendment to the Refugee Act and its updating, particularly with regard to access to the asylum procedure by foreigners crossing the border illegally, was being prepared in cooperation with the UNHCR Liaison Office in Bratislava.

The experience of the Slovak Republic confirmed the growing trend of abuses of the right to asylum by illegal migrants trying to transit the country on their way to western Europe. That was another reason why his Government was trying to adapt its procedures in order to provide protection to those in real need and to identify those who tried to misuse the institution of asylum.

26. At present, the Migration Office of the Ministry of the Interior provided adequate social and health care to all applicants for refugee status. His Government emphasized the local integration of those with recognized refugee status. Thanks to the support of UNHCR and local NGOs, projects providing grants for the reconstruction of accommodations for refugees in various parts of the country had been carried out since 1996 in the framework of the Government Programme of Complex Integration of Refugees. That Programme, together with the system of refugee status determination for persecuted persons, was fully comparable with the systems used in the developed countries of western Europe and the Slovak Republic planned to continue with that type of activity in cooperation with UNHCR. Aware of the important role of UNHCR in solving problems concerning the reception of and assistance to refugees, his Government had provided the UNHCR Liaison Office with a new office building in the centre of the capital in early 1998. Reconstruction and rental costs were being paid by the Government.

27. Mr. TANDAR (Observer for Afghanistan) said that, other than in the case of natural disasters, the root causes of refugee flows included foreseeable military acts, foreign intervention, social and economic injustice in the design, planning and implementation of development plans and projects in various fields, cultural and administrative policies, poor administration of justice, oppression and human rights violations. The international community had adequate instruments of analysis and observation at its disposal to predict large-scale humanitarian disasters. The question was whether the political will existed at the international level to put an end to those situations. Regrettably, that will was often lacking. Ways and means leading to the exercise of international solidarity and to the solution to the problem therefore had to be considered.

28. In many cases, political conditions in the countries of origin were the major obstacle to the return of refugees. The problem was primarily one of human rights violations. Such situations required political, diplomatic and economic pressure by the international community to put an end to the mass exodus of populations and allow them to return to their countries of origin. Partiality was, however, the rule in that regard. There were numerous examples of double standards. The economic, strategic and political interests of countries that could well be efficient in specific cases dominated the expression of humanitarian solidarity for the return of refugees.

29. The Taliban in Afghanistan and the States providing them with support were a perfect example of how the systematic violation of human rights prevented the return of refugees to their country of origin. The overview of UNHCR activities 1997-1999 (A/AC.96/900) not only described that situation, but clearly contradicted the fallacious pretension of those supporting the Taliban that, thanks to their protection, security had been restored to Afghanistan. According to paragraph 344, involuntary movements of displaced persons and new refugees, and the violations of basic human rights, especially

those of women and girls, were some of UNHCR's main preoccupations in the country. In 1997, some 87,000 Afghan refugees in Pakistan had returned. He wished to be certain that that figure did not include persons who had been armed and trained to fight with the Taliban and who had been tempted to benefit from aid upon their return. Unfortunately, the report did not specify the number of new refugees.

30. According to paragraph 347, the returns of Afghan refugees to their country from Iran had declined significantly since 1996. Following the recent occupation by the Taliban of territories in the northern and central parts of Afghanistan, a considerable number of people had taken refuge in Iran and there was reason to fear that the ethnic cleansing policy of the Taliban might provoke the exodus of even more people.

31. He drew attention to the misery and distress of the Afghan refugees, especially in recent years. They were living in total destitution and despair and his Government was not unaware of the burden represented by the presence of 2.3 million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan. It had learned with great concern that the Government of Pakistan had recently closed six educational institutions, including universities, which had, on the initiative of Afghan refugees and thanks to international donations, been giving courses to Afghan refugees. He called on the Government of Pakistan, which had been hosting a large number of Afghan refugees on its territory for so many years, to reverse that decision, which was completely unjustified. At a time when the Taliban were prohibiting all education, particularly for women and girls, the continued activities of those educational institutions were of great importance for the post-Taliban period in Afghanistan, which he hoped would be soon. Furthermore, those institutions employed many women teachers and gave courses to girls.

32. The return of Afghan refugees to their country lay largely in the hands of the international community; active and well-targeted solidarity could shorten the period of exile. While material aid for refugees should be continued and strengthened, strong political, diplomatic and economic pressure also had to be brought to bear on the very small number of countries providing massive support to the Taliban in order to induce them to accept the principle of political discussion, put an end to the conflict and respect international law in the field of human rights, particularly the rights of women and girls. There was no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and military victories were mere illusions. Only the restoration, recognition and enforcement of the law could guarantee the Afghan people a future of peace and enable the Afghan refugees to return to their country under conditions of dignity and respect.

33. Mr. NAHAYO (Observer for Burundi) congratulated the High Commissioner on her re-election and offered his condolences to UNHCR for the staff members killed in a recent air accident, particular Pierce Gerety, Director of Operations for the Great Lakes region.

34. Burundi had been hosting refugees since 1959 as a result of periodic unrest in the Great Lakes region and other parts of Africa and was well aware of the burden they represented for host countries. It had therefore initiated a voluntary repatriation policy for Burundian refugees abroad, a policy that

had unfortunately been undermined by the social and political crisis that had broken out in Burundi in late 1993 and the subsequent crises in the Great Lakes region which had led to a further and continuing inflow of refugees into Burundi. He thanked UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and all other bodies for their assistance to Burundi in dealing with refugees and displaced persons.

35. Since 1997, the Government, in cooperation with UNHCR and the United Republic of Tanzania, had been examining the question of providing facilities for voluntary returnees, thereby lessening the international burden through a policy of solidarity. The Government deplored the fact that the voluntary returnees had been infiltrated by armed individuals who were a source of renewed insecurity and were creating new refugees. Burundi thanked UNHCR for assisting the Tanzanian authorities in protecting refugee camps against militarization by rebels, but it would like to see firmer action to maintain security and preserve the dignity of refugees.

36. UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations were actively assisting the Government in the settlement and integration of returnees. But, while the embargo imposed on Burundi by the countries of the region remained in place, humanitarian action would prove inadequate because, in addition to the returnees, there were over 250,000 displaced persons to attend to. The international community had a duty to persuade neighbouring countries that it was time to lift the embargo, especially since the final condition for its termination, the opening of negotiations with the rebels, had been met. The third round of talks was due to open in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania, on 12 October. The Government trusted that the negotiations would lay the basis for stability and hence for the reintegration of returnees and displaced persons.

37. U DENZIL ABEL (Observer for Myanmar) said that remarks made about Myanmar by a number of representatives of members of the Executive Committee at the current session displayed a lack of understanding of the true nature of the circumstances. The overwhelming majority of persons who had crossed the eastern border over the years were economic migrants looking for better job opportunities and higher wages. In recent months, many of them had voluntarily returned to Myanmar because their expectations had not been met. A minority of those who crossed the eastern border were remnants of the Karen National Union (KNU), many of whose former members had accepted the Government's peace offers and returned to the country. Those offers of peace and reconciliation still stood. With regard to the advice offered by some members of the Executive Committee on how UNHCR should interact with the authorities in the east of the country, the Myanmar authorities themselves were best placed to understand the circumstances prevailing in those areas.

38. With regard to migrants on the western border, the existence of haphazard and often illegal cross-border population movements was a well-known historical fact. People crossed the border in both directions in search of seasonal employment or to visit relatives and friends. As a result of cooperation with UNHCR and its neighbour to the west, 229,392 persons had returned to Myanmar between September 1992 and August 1997. The remaining 7,000 persons who had been verified for acceptance had been unable to return for reasons beyond the control of the Myanmar authorities, although the date

of closure of the reception facilities had been extended time and time again, an expensive exercise in terms of manpower and financial and material resources. The Myanmar authorities had informed their counterparts that further returns could be accomplished through bilateral diplomatic channels.

39. He wished the High Commissioner continued success in her work and pledged his country's full cooperation.

40. Mr. NAZARIAN (Armenia) said that Armenia bore the consequences of the conflict in the Transcaucasus region by hosting more than 300,000 refugees who had fled from Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh. Their living conditions were still precarious despite the Armenian Government's ongoing efforts and numerous decrees and decisions recently adopted to establish a legal basis for their resettlement. Refugees had been granted the right to own private land and livestock and to hold shares and privatization vouchers. Retired refugees received pensions and benefited from a system of subsidies and allocations. The Government was implementing follow-up action to the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States. With the help of UNHCR, Armenia had initiated a programme of voluntary repatriation of refugees, providing assistance to alleviate economic hardship. Armenia welcomed the continuing joint efforts by UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on behalf of refugees in the region.

41. The statement made by the representative of Azerbaijan at the previous meeting bore no relationship to the Executive Committee's annual theme and consisted entirely of political propaganda, exaggerated facts and fictitious figures which contradicted those cited in UNHCR and other official reports, resolutions and documents. Such statements created confusion in the international community and among donor countries and organizations, making them reluctant to contribute effectively to programmes on behalf of refugees and internally displaced persons in Armenia and the entire Caucasian region.

42. It was for the authorities in Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh issue with the assistance of OSCE mediators. Despite the ceasefire that had been in force since 1994, Azerbaijan continued to refer to a "conflict situation" and an "undeclared war zone", distorting reality and creating artificial obstacles to the satisfactory resolution of refugee problems. The Armenian Government had already paid the equivalent of US$ 110 million to Azerbaijani refugees in compensation for loss of property in Armenia. No comparable action had been taken by the Azerbaijani Government to compensate the 340,000 Armenian refugees who had been forced to leave the country 10 years previously. A serious effort by the Azerbaijani Government in that direction would demonstrate its commitment to burden-sharing and to national, regional and international solidarity arrangements for refugees.

43. Mr. RUAS MANUEL (Observer for Angola) congratulated the High Commissioner on her re-election.

44. The peace process in Angola had been paralysed for a number of months because of the dilatory manoeuvres of Jonas Savimbi, who had failed to fulfil the obligations he had assumed under the Lusaka Protocol which had been adopted four years previously and which set out the principles and legal instruments for the establishment of peace and the free movement of people and goods throughout Angola. Jonas Savimbi's delaying tactics were designed to give him time to reorganize and re-equip his military forces. In June 1998, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) had regained control of a number of localities that had been transferred to the State administration. UNITA's strengthened positions vis-à-vis the Government, observer countries and the United Nations clearly demonstrated that it no longer considered the Lusaka Protocol as the legal instrument for the restoration of peace in Angola.

45. The Government had been obliged to divert substantial resources to ensure the security of the population and had therefore been unable to meet certain commitments, including its contribution to UNHCR, when they had fallen due.

46. The Government had launched a programme of repatriation and reintegration of Angolan refugees in 1995. Some 118,000 refugees had returned to date. With a view to reintegrating them into their communities of origin, most of which had been severely affected by the war, support was provided both to returning families and to the communities concerned. UNHCR had assisted in the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure in the areas with the largest number of returnees. Over 100 quick impact projects had been completed, including the rehabilitation of health facilities, schools and roads. However, the success of the programme depended on the restoration of peace in Angola and the Government was doing its utmost to achieve that aim as soon as possible.

47. Mr. THLOMELAND (South Africa) congratulated the High Commissioner on her re-election and assured her of South Africa's continuing support. South Africa thanked UNHCR for its untiring efforts on behalf of refugees in Africa and elsewhere and was grateful to the Governments and taxpayers of the donor community. The contribution of developing countries that hosted large numbers of refugees for long periods, while harder to quantify, was infinitely more valuable in terms of refugee protection and should be recognized as such.

48. South Africa was faced with composite flows of asylum-seekers and high levels of abuse of asylum procedures. Thousands of refugees, mainly from Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, had been granted asylum since the end of apartheid. The improved refugee status determination procedures proposed in draft legislation currently before Parliament would speed up work on the huge backlog of asylum applications.

49. South Africa was grateful for ongoing UNHCR assistance in national refugee policy formulation. The comprehensive new system of refugee protection was built on an understanding of the important role of civil society, not only in assisting asylum-seekers to attain self-sufficiency and local integration, but also in raising public awareness as a bulwark against intolerance of foreigners.

50. He also commended UNHCR's contribution to regional refugee policy harmonization and capacity-building. Such problems as irregular migration, composite flows and abuse of the asylum system could be addressed adequately only on a regional basis. In that connection, he welcomed the establishment of a UNHCR regional refugee database.

51. With regard to the annual theme, the need for the equitable distribution of responsibility for refugees had been eloquently expressed, but very few practical solutions had been proposed. If they were to have any chance of success, burden-sharing arrangements should be built on existing regional foundations and draw on the experience gained in earlier ad hoc arrangements. He feared that the absorption capacity of host and resettlement countries as well as the generosity of the donor community were finite. Any proposal for a comprehensive international burden-sharing arrangement would therefore have to be carefully constructed, taking into account existing resource limitations and political constraints.

52. Burden-sharing seemed to mean different things to different people. Developing countries, particularly countries of first asylum, argued for retroactive burden-sharing and the reallocation of resources to assist them in dealing with the impact of their long-term hospitality. The countries of the North seemed to be prepared to work on burden-sharing arrangements as a mechanism to deal with future mass outflows of refugees. The two approaches were not necessarily irreconcilable. He welcomed UNHCR's information note on the subject (A/AC.96/904) and its willingness to be of service in probing the matter further. He also commended the comprehensive study on burden-sharing undertaken by the States involved in the Intergovernmental Consultations (IGC) and the follow-up thereto coordinated by the Government of Denmark.

53. South Africa would strongly support any attempt to quantify, even in a rudimentary and flawed manner, the per capita cost implications for countries hosting large numbers of refugees. A formal listing of host country contributions, both in cash and in kind, would accord host countries the recognition they deserved and enable developing countries to use such data in debt relief and development aid procurement efforts. Recognition of host-country contributions would also correct the existing perception that UNHCR was unduly donor-driven. The data thus collected should be used by UNHCR as a catalyst to involve other actors in the development sphere in the task of dealing with the adverse economic, social and political impact of large-scale refugee inflows on developing countries.

54. The efforts of the international community were inadequately focused on the root causes of conflict and mass displacement, which included abject poverty and lack of social and economic development. Investment by the international community in social development in countries of origin, including capacity-building and the establishment of a human rights culture, was the most cost-effective way of preventing mass outflows. South Africa was prepared to play a constructive role in that regard.

55. The international community could also do more to assist refugee-hosting development countries by, for example, accepting additional refugees within the framework of resettlement programmes.

56. South Africa would appreciate a renewed commitment by the international community to the principles of non-refoulement and safe return. Respect for the institution of asylum and non-restrictive asylum policies were essential ingredients of burden-sharing.

57. Universal accession to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees was a fundamental building-block of any burden-sharing regime. Exceptions thereto impeded international efforts to have full protective practice accepted by all States.

58. South Africa reiterated its pledge to contribute as best it could and within its limited means to the work of UNHCR.

59. Mr. MUKARO (Zimbabwe) said that burden-sharing was already in place at the national level in Zimbabwe, with the Government collaborating with non-governmental organizations and churches in dealing with refugee problems. There was also a will to collaborate at the regional level and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) had attempted, through diplomatic and other means, to prevent conflict from escalating and to ensure peace and stability in order to prevent refugee flows.

60. Owing to their geographical position, some countries received more refugees than others. He wondered whether the countries nearest to refugees' countries of origin should be expected to bear all the responsibility for displaced persons. He believed that the principle of first country of asylum should not be strictly enforced, as some countries would be overwhelmed by refugees, and that, at the regional level, countries should share the burden as much as possible. On the other hand, refugees should not have to move too far from their own countries, in order to facilitate repatriation. In addition, regional assistance should be directed to countries bearing more than their fair share of the burden.

61. Support for UNHCR took the form of funds to UNHCR or asylum granted to refugees. Although it was sometimes not appreciated that most developing countries' contribution took the latter form, it was a significant contribution. Developing countries were prepared to grant asylum provided that the burden on their economies was not too great and assistance was forthcoming from UNHCR, which in turn was funded by member States. International support was necessary for such countries, which otherwise risked overstretching resources that might be meagre even for their own nationals, a situation that could pose a threat to the institution of asylum, since, once asylum had been granted, the State had an obligation to care for refugees.

62. The restructuring of UNHCR operations in Zimbabwe and the surrounding region, combined with diminishing resources, had led to a failure to provide refugees with the same levels of assistance as they had received in the past, which had prompted demonstrations at UNHCR offices. He requested UNHCR to redress the situation urgently and ensure that the refugees were adequately catered for. There was a feeling among the refugees that countries with economic difficulties were unable to support them adequately and they were demanding resettlement in countries with healthier economies. That was a solution to be avoided, since such an influx of refugees would overwhelm the more developed developing countries.

63. Mr. MOUNTAIN (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) thanked the High Commissioner for her words of appreciation for the work of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. UNHCR and OCHA cooperated successfully in many areas. As a key operational agency on the ground, UNHCR had benefited from the "humanitarian diplomacy" of OCHA when negotiating access to victims and the crucial work of UNHCR on protection was often complemented by the advocacy of OCHA, one of whose continuing priorities was to keep humanitarian issues on the international political agenda.

64. The first Humanitarian Segment of the Economic and Social Council, held in July, had clearly indicated the direction that member States believed efforts on behalf of the millions of refugees and displaced persons worldwide should take. Firstly, it had been emphasized that humanitarian activities should be seen in the context of peacekeeping and political development initiatives and agencies had been urged to further improve their coordination in the field and at headquarters. In that regard, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) provided a forum for discussion and decisions on key policy issues, while, at the field level, OCHA provided support for the resident and humanitarian coordinators through field coordination units and disaster management teams. The inter-agency process was thus a tangible reality in the planning and delivery of humanitarian aid. Coordination required a strategic framework and he believed that the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) would prove an effective strategic programming tool at the country and regional levels. Operational agencies' commitment to using and improving CAP was crucial and he expressed his appreciation for UNHCR involvement in the IASC subcommittee on CAP.

65. Secondly, the Economic and Social Council had urged agencies to enhance local capacity in emergency and disaster response and to utilize existing capacity in developing countries that might be available closer to a disaster site and cost less, thereby making it easier for countries to move on to reconstruction and resume development. OCHA was willing to assist in that area, which represented a major challenge for all the humanitarian agencies.

66. Lastly, he recalled that the prime function of OCHA Geneva was to work with its partners to ensure that the United Nations response to the plight of the victims of manmade and natural disasters was as effective as possible and he expressed his appreciation for the excellent collaboration of UNHCR in that work.

67. Mr. EL SAYED (Organization of African Unity) said that it was time to reaffirm the commitment to eradicate the root causes of displacement and to provide refugees with adequate protection and assistance. The Executive Committee should call on the international community to increase its assistance to asylum countries in a spirit of burden-sharing, in order to help them to cope with the social, economic and environmental consequences of hosting refugees. A comprehensive approach to the problem was necessary. Large influxes of refugees impeded economic and social development, undermined the already fragile social order, profoundly affected the natural environment and compelled nations to share scarce resources. African countries had thus far shown real hospitality, but he was afraid that the continuous flow of refugees might lead to confrontation with nationals of those countries. In addition, some countries might wish to take undesirable political measures,

including the forced repatriation of refugees. Such action would be partly a result of the donor fatigue that had become noticeable in recent years and he urged the international community to consider providing adequate assistance to refugees.

68. With 6 million refugees, or around one third of the overall total, Africa had the greatest number of refugees in the world. In addition, there were more than 15 million internally displaced persons, some of whom lived in very miserable conditions that were worse than those of refugees, since they did not receive the same attention from the international community. OAU believed that they, too, should benefit from relief and humanitarian assistance. The situation of refugees in Africa had not improved much in the last year, despite positive political developments that had encouraged voluntary repatriation. Armed conflicts and political violence, frequently rooted in ethnic tensions and exacerbated by poverty and social inequities, had kept the number of refugees and displaced persons very high and virtually unchanged. Increased humanitarian assistance was urgently required while waiting for decision makers to find political solutions.

69. OAU had for some time been very concerned at the turmoil in central Africa, which was taking innocent lives and destroying the infrastructure, seriously hampering development in both the region and the continent. In April and May, the OAU Commission on Refugees had visited countries in the northern and central areas of west Africa and given them a token amount to help alleviate the sufferings of refugees and displaced persons there. Missions were also due to visit other parts of Africa in the near future.

70. He expressed appreciation for the cooperation of UNHCR with OAU and for the operational logistical support UNHCR had provided to OAU in the field. Such links should be strengthened in order to enable UNHCR to provide more effective support for African efforts to resolve conflicts. It was in the framework of such cooperation that OAU and UNHCR had organized a regional meeting in Kampala, Uganda, on 8-9 May 1998, on refugee issues in the Great Lakes region, which had discussed refugee protection and security, return and reintegration and the rehabilitation of areas affected by refugees.

71. In the face of a continuing refugee crisis in Africa, the May 1997 meeting of the OAU Council of Ministers in Harare, Zimbabwe, had requested the Commission on Refugees to collaborate with UNHCR in convening a ministerial meeting on refugees and displaced persons. Preparations were now under way for that meeting, which was due to be held in Khartoum, Sudan, in December 1998, and all regional and subregional organizations and non-governmental organizations were invited to attend. The findings and recommendations of the Khartoum Ministerial Conference on Refugees would be adopted by the OAU summit in Algeria in June 1999, the thirtieth anniversary of both the Commission on Refugees and the beginning of UNHCR-OAU cooperation.

72. Lastly, he extended profound condolences on behalf of OAU to the families and friends of those UNHCR staff who had lost their lives in the crash of Swissair flight 111. Special condolences went to the family and friends of Mr. Pierce Gerety, and he paid tribute to Mr. Gerety for his

tireless work to find solutions to the problem of refugees in the Great Lakes region. He also expressed respect and appreciation for the staff of UNHCR, who frequently had to work in very difficult circumstances, and he called for the immediate release of Mr. Vincent Cochetel.

73. Ms. TESFAMICHAEL (Eritrea), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that there was reliable third party documentation from, inter alia, the Government of the United States, the United Nations Secretary-General, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Amnesty International of the mass expulsion and arbitrary detention of Eritreans in Ethiopia and of forcible separation of families. Her Government invited UNHCR and any other interested Government or international organization to verify the facts in that documentation or on the ground.

74. The Government of Eritrea was inside its internationally recognized borders and it was Ethiopia which had drawn a new mark in 1997 incorporating a large swath of Eritrean land. Ethiopia had killed members of Eritrea's armed forces and civilian population without provocation.

75. The Government believed the conflict could be solved only by peaceful and legal means and, to that end, had put forward a workable peace proposal. The Ethiopian Government had, however, ignored the proposal and had announced that it had completed its preparations for war.

76. Only a few hours previously, it had been reported that 138 Eritreans, including women and children, had been dumped on the border with Djibouti. Nothing could be gained by the use of force and violence, which would only result in unnecessary suffering, loss of life and destruction. Eritrea had consistently been committed to a search for a peaceful and legal solution. If the situation deteriorated, Ethiopia would bear full responsibility.

The meeting rose at 5.25 p.m.